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ABSTRACT

The long career of a single college professor reflects the way the entire profession has been shaped over the past several decades. Edward Corbett began his teaching career in 1948 at Creighton University, where he taught five courses per semester. His background in rhetoric derived from his graduate education at the University of Chicago, where instructional practices in the English department had an Aristotelian foundation. Despite his experience in the New Criticism and his ability to analyze a 14-line poem exhaustively, he found himself unable to teach about the form of non-fiction prose, which was a fundamental aspect of teaching composition. Consequently, he began to study rhetoric, which began a lifelong interest in the subject and which formed the basis of his doctoral dissertation. Thus he became not only a professor of literature but also of rhetoric and composition. In recent years, there has been a growing sophistication and professionalization in the teaching of writing. Numerous new journals have appeared which deal with composition studies. In addition, recently an astonishing number of books dealing with classical rhetoric have appeared, showing that as a field of scholarly activity rhetoric is alive and well. (Contains 21 references.) (HB)

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A Professional Journey

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From Literary Critic to Rhetorician:
A Professional Journey

Edward P.J. Corbett

I have done some retrospecting about the profession at least three times, once in an article, once in an extensive interview, and once in a keynote speech--all of which were eventually published. I do not expect this fourth venture into retrospecting ever to be published.

I began my teaching in the fall of 1948 at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, after I had taken my Master's degree in English at the University of Chicago. It was fairly easy at the time to get a teaching job in a college or university, even for someone with only an M.A. degree, because teachers were desperately needed to accommodate the legions of discharged veterans of World War II who were beginning or resuming their college careers on the GI Bill. I was very fortunate in getting my first teaching job at a first-rate private university that, in addition to its undergraduate programs and its graduate programs leading to an M.A. degree in a number of disciplines, had professional programs in medicine, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, and law.

In my first year there, I had a 15-hour teaching load each semester--four Freshman English courses and one sophomore survey course in English literature. I recall that after teaching those four composition courses, two in the morning and two in the afternoon, it was like dying and going to heaven when I walked into that sophomore literature course at 3:00 in the afternoon, my last class of the day. It wasn't just that I was sick of the sound of my own voice, intoning virtually the same lesson four times in those writing courses; but it was also because I was conscience-stricken about my performance in

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those writing courses. I didn't know what the hell I was doing in those writing courses. I had never taken a composition course in my undergraduate years, and I had no course in my Master's program that prepared me to teach composition. When I look back on what I did to those poor kids then, I wish I could apologize to them and return a portion of their tuition fees.

But, boy, was I prepared to teach that literature course! Almost all of my graduate courses were in literature or literary criticism. Those were the days at the University of Chicago when the President, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and the philosophy teacher, Mortimer Adler, had infected the university with Aristotelianism. In the English department, largely under the influence of Ronald Crane, we also got a heavy dosage of Aristotle, but the so-called Chicago School of Criticism was rooted in Aristotle's Poetics, not in his Rhetoric. The other critical system that was riding high at the time in many American colleges was the so-called New Criticism, which had been initiated by I.A. Richards and popularized by men like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. As a result of the training I got in my literature courses, I could analyze a poem or a play or a short story punctiliously in my sophomore survey course.

I have told the following story publicly many times during my professional career, once in print. Although I could analyze a fourteen-line poem exhaustively, I did not know how to analyze the form of a piece of non-fiction prose. How did one lead one's students to an understanding and appreciation of the artistry of a Tatler essay by Richard Steele or of the stylistic excellence of an excerpt from John Henry Newman's The Idea of a University? Whenever I came to a piece of non-fiction prose in our literature anthology, I would spend

time giving the students some historical or biographical information pertinent to the prose piece we were about to discuss, and then I would spend the rest of the time engaging the students in a spirited discussion of some idea in the piece of prose.

I became so frustrated with my inability to anatomize a piece of prose in the same way that I could anatomize a piece of poetry that one day, in desperation, I went off to the university library in search of some help. Browsing in the literature section of the library, I spotted a calfskin-covered book on the shelf, bearing the title Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. I had only a fuzzy idea about what rhetoric was, but I sure knew what belles lettres was. Belles lettres was the fancy French term for all those poems and plays and stories we were reading in our literature anthology. Maybe this book--it was a book by somebody named Hugh Blair--could give me some help in analyzing the form of a piece of non-fiction prose.

When I took the book down from the shelf, it opened, fortuitously, to Lecture XX, where Blair analyzes the style of the first of the four Spectator essays (Numbers 411-414) that he analyzes in this section of his lectures. Aha! I was going to be dealing in class with Addison's Spectator essays later that week. I stood there and started to read Blair's analysis. I was astounded. Blair did a detailed analysis of the style of each successive sentence in the whole essay. Mirabile dictu! I had never before in my life encountered a stylistic analysis of every sentence in an extensive passage of prose. I stood there enthralled, reading Blair's perspicacious analysis of Joseph Addison's prose style. And I went on to read Blair's stylistic analysis of the next Spectator essay by Addison.

Realizing then that I was probably going to get a lot of help

from this book for my literature classes, I decided to check out the book from the library and take it home to crib some notes for my lectures. Well, after reading at home the other two stylistic analyses of Addison's essay and an analysis of one of Jonathan Swift's essays, I turned to the beginning of the book and started to read the earlier lectures. It was then that I discovered what rhetoric was--and that discovery turned my professional life around.

At the end of my second year at Creighton, I liked teaching so much that I decided to go on for a Ph.D. in English. Because I got an offer of a teaching assistantship at Loyola University in Chicago, I elected to do my doctoral work there. By that time, reading Blair's book had prompted me to go back to the Greek and Roman rhetoricians and discover the beginnings of the glorious tradition, and I was determined to do my dissertation on some aspect of that rhetorical tradition. Fortunately, I found a professor at Loyola who was willing to serve as my advisor on a dissertation dealing with Hugh Blair's rhetorical theory and its relationship to the whole tradition of rhetoric.

Soon after returning to Creighton University as an Assistant Professor, I was appointed as the Director of Freshman English. Now at least I had some coherent idea of how to guide students in acquiring writing skills. I continued to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in literature, but now I had added to my duties the task of drawing up a sensible syllabus for the two-semester Freshman English program and of training the teaching assistants who would join the regular members of the English faculty in teaching the freshman composition course. While I was doing my doctoral work in Chicago in the early 1950's, I had attended at least two conventions of the Con-

ference on College Composition and Communication. (The CCCC, as you may know, had its beginnings in Chicago, and during the early years of its existence, it always held its annual convention in Chicago.) So I joined that august organization and got further guidance in how to teach writing.

And that is the story of how I made the passage from being a professor of literature and literary criticism to being a professor of literature and literary criticism and a professor of rhetoric and composition. The other members of this panel made a comparable passage.

In previous retrospective reports, I described in some detail the growing sophistication and professionalization of those graduate students and teachers who were committed to the teaching of writing. The National Council of Teachers of English, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Modern Language Association are just three of the professional organizations that in the last twenty years or so contributed to the enhanced sophistication of teachers of composition. But a number of universities in this country, as the Tate-Chapman survey in 1976 confirmed, established elaborate programs to train prospective teachers in rhetoric and composition. Then there were the special seminars and conferences, usually held during the summer months, to upgrade the knowledge and professionalism of teachers of writing. For instance, the conferences held summer after summer at the University of Wyoming and at Penn State University; Janice Lauer's Summer Seminars in Rhetoric staged originally at the University of Detroit and then at Purdue University; Han Guth's Young Rhetoricians' Conferences held in the summertime in Northern California; Joseph Williams's seminars at the University of Chicago; Elaine Maimon's series of NEH-sponsored conferences held at Beaver

College in Pennsylvania on writing-across-the-curriculum; the Rhetoric Society of America's conferences at the University of Texas in Arlington; the conferences held at the University of New Hampshire in alternate summers; and the international conference on Learning to Write that Aviva Freedman and Ian Pringle put together in 1979 in Ottawa for the Canadian Council of Teachers of English.

In a College English article (April 1984), Robert Connors informed us about the fifteen new journals in composition studies that had been created in the 1970's and the first half of the 1980's. Since the late 1960's five new journals dealing with rhetoric were founded: Rhetoric and Philosophy, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Pre/Text, Rhetorica, and Rhetoric Review. In my retrospective report in the December 1987 issue of CCC, I listed the astonishing number of books written by prominent people in our profession that informed us about the important research that had been done in rhetoric and composition or that presented a particular teacher's philosophy about the teaching of writing. All of this activity constituted impressive evidence that many teachers of writing in this country, even callow ones like me, had come of age in the 1970's and 1980's.

Yes, we have come a long way in the last twenty years. But because of a special interest of mine, I asked myself recently, "How has classical rhetoric fared amidst all of this enhanced sophistication in composition studies." I date the revival of interest in rhetoric among teachers of English as having its beginning in 1963. Classical rhetoric was a hot topic in the profession during the second half of the 1960's, but then it faded into the background. Some important work was going on in rhetorical studies, but this work was being upstaged by other developments that captured the attention of English

teachers. Maybe classical rhetoric had finally revealed itself as being no longer relevant to the pedagogical concerns of teachers in the second half of the twentieth century, as C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon had suggested in 1984 in their book Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing.

When I looked about me, however, at the reviews of, and the ads for, new books, I noted an astonishing number of books dealing with classical rhetoric, and when I read some of those new books, I got a distinct sense that classical rhetoric was not dead. Listen to this litany of new books, all of them published within the last ten years and some of them published within the last three years.

Maybe the most significant publications in this context are the two new, highly acclaimed translations of Aristotle's Rhetoric: George Kennedy's Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse (Oxford UP, 1991) and H.C. Lawson-Tancred's Aristotle, The Art of Rhetoric (Penguin Books, 1991). There are at least two new books on the rhetoricians before Aristotle: Susan Jarratt's Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured (Southern Illinois UP, 1991), which at the recent MLA convention received honorable mention for the Mina Shaughnessy Award, and Richard Leo Enos's just published Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle (Waveland Press, 1993). C. Jan Swearingen in her Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies (Oxford UP, 1991) examines works of the Pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine to support her argument that rhetoric and literature are interdependent. The most recent new history of rhetoric is Brian Vickers's In Defence of Rhetoric (Clarendon Press, 1988), 42% of which covers the history of the Greek and Roman rhetoricians. William Covino's The Art of Wondering: A Revisionist Return to the History of

Rhetoric (Boynton/Cook, 1988) has also made a significant contribution to the history of rhetoric.

Also to be noted are the new anthologies of primary texts. The most comprehensive of these anthologies is Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present (Bedford Books, 1987). But two of these anthologies reprint excerpts from classical rhetorics only: Thomas W. Benson and Michael Prosser's Readings in Classical Rhetoric (Hermagoras Press, 1988) and Patricia P. Matsen, Philip Rollinson, and Marion Sousa's Readings from Classical Rhetoric (Southern Illinois UP, 1990). These anthologies will be a boon for undergraduate and graduate courses in the history of rhetoric.

The new books that relate contemporary composition practices to the tradition of rhetoric are too numerous for me to mention in this litany. If you want a more extensive list, I urge you to consult Göran "George" Moberg's "The Revival of Rhetoric: A Bibliographic Essay," Journal of Basic Writing 9 (Fall 1990): 66-82, which also carries a four-page annotated bibliography at the end of the article. I will mention only a few of these books here: Kathleen E. Welch, The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric: Appropriations of Ancient Discourse (Erlbaum, 1990); James J. Murphy, ed. A Short History of Writing: From Ancient Greece to Twentieth Century America (Hermagoras Press, 1990); Halford Ryan, Classical Communication for the Contemporary Communicator (Mayfield, 1992); Robert Connors, Lisa Ede, and Andrea Lunsford, eds. Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse (Southern Illinois UP, 1984).

In light of this truncated litany, I would say that classical rhetoric is alive and well and is living in the United States of America.

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